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Preprint / Preprint

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

König, A. (2009). Motivating the population to cope with the demographic change. In *Parallel patterns of urban growth and decline. Compendium of abstracts* (pp. 1-65). Kaiserslautern: International Urban Planning and Environment Association (IUPE). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-57518>

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Motivating the population to cope with the demographic change

Armin König

The effects of the demographic challenge will change the nature of politics and the emphasis of political sectors over the next 20 years, especially on a local level. This calls for new ways of thinking, new social skills and a new frame of awareness to allow for sustainable development.

The community of Illingen in the Saarland, a town of 18,000 residents, has not denied the demographic change, but has accepted it. It shows how the populace, politics and administration have been confronted with inconvenient truths in a participation process. The process of strategically aimed, participative development planning allows for flexible responses to new situations – even to new suggestions in governmental arrangements. For the first time we can empirically support the claim that demographic change can be controlled using an integrated development concept.

The Illingen 2030 project has not only raised awareness regarding the opportunities and limitations of participative processes, but has also provided an indication of how political priorities are changing. Land consumption around the city borders must be drastically reduced as the infrastructure costs will shoot up at an above average rate during the demographic change. The city centres must be strengthened. The establishment of large discount stores in suburbia zones may well have to be stopped in accordance with building laws.

Using strategic management, mayors can direct the process of change so that communication, cooperation, concentration and profiling to maximise benefits is just as possible as the residents' actual participation. Classic administration and traditional local affairs, however, cannot resolve these problems. Participation incorporates citizens' skills, makes use of their competencies, and promotes involvement in society and the identity of the residents.

The Illingen 2030 process has also shown the limitations of participation. Unconventional ideas are often subject to prejudice in participative processes.

The most innovative project, the relocation of the grammar school and the development of a “City of Knowledge” (Wissenscity), was given no chance to survive in the participation process: It was torpedoed by local and regional politicians. Inconvenient adjustment processes (infrastructure, communal facilities) were omitted for the most part.

Project managers were successful, however, in empowering the township. Considerable social capital was acquired. The community started a new children’s home project, a participative youth project for a new youth centre and built a new, modern central playground. All projects are planned to be barrier-free. The identification of the residents with their town and their home has been strengthened. Societies are cooperating more successfully and a social network for the elderly is emerging.

Local governance arrangements in the involvement of civil society provide a promising way of resolving the problems together. Classic cross-sectional administrations will lose their significance due to cooperations and e-Government. Qualified citizens’ advice, however, will become a new area of emphasis. The community program to address the problem of vacant old houses was particularly successful. By motivating the populace in the residential quarter, it was possible to reduce the number of unoccupied houses by more than 60 percent over five years.

